

## FROM FIELD AND STUDY

**Overnight torpidity in Australian arid-country birds.** —The evidence for torpidity in some Australian birds provided by Serventy (*Emu*, 70, 1970: 27 and 201) and Congreve (*Emu*, 72, 1972: 32) draws attention to a phenomenon which, I believe, occurs far more generally in Australia than ornithologists have ever contemplated.

My experiences in pursuit of birds for avicultural purposes suggests that torpidity is a physiological device which small passerines in particular would have to develop in order to survive in near-desert climates. In the winter months the nights are usually bitterly cold but after the sun rises the days are pleasant and equable. A small-bodied bird, if it could enter a state of suspended animation each night, would survive better in such an environment, by an economy of energy, than one which had to ingest extra food to keep warm.

I have noted overnight torpidity in a number of species, including, young Crimson Chat (*Epthianura tricolor*), adult Banded Whiteface (*Aphelocephala nigricincta*), adult Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) and adult White-fronted Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris albigrons*).

The case of the Crimson Chats is interesting. In this species the young disperse from the nest at an early age and each individual spends the night separately on the ground in a torpid state, superficially resembling death. I have picked them up early in the morning and the birds remained inert for some time in the hand before warmth gradually revived them. I have observed young Banded Whitefaces captured by Mr T. Spence, Director of the South Perth Zoological Gardens, on a winter desert tour, and found them to enter a torpid state each night in a very similar manner to that described by Heumann (*Emu*, 26, 1926: 110) for the Mistletoe bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*). They revived with increasing warmth in the mornings.

— NOEL IVES\*, 6 Lilian Avenue, Applecross W.A. 6153. (\*deceased)

**An early record of over-night torpidity in Western Australian birds.** —The occurrence of dormancy or torpidity in Australian arid-country birds has only comparatively recently been demonstrated, and the only published observations are cited in the foregoing note. The earliest Australian record of the phenomenon appears to have been made by Rosendo Salvado, Abbot of New Norcia, in his book, *Memorie Storiche dell'Australia*, published in Rome in 1851, with a Spanish translation in 1853 and a French edition in 1854. But the first English translation was published by Fr. E.J. Storman only in 1977, under the title of *The Salvado Memoirs*, University of Western Australia Press, and until its publication the significance of Salvado's observation had been overlooked by naturalists. Salvado wrote: "Not seldom in the winter season, that is June and July, I have found birds big as a thrush, which had fallen to the ground benumbed by the bitter cold of the night; I would take them up in my hands and not let them go until they had recovered their natural warmth."

— D.L. SERVENTY, Nedlands.

**Notes on a movement of young Banded Stilts.** —In September 1981 while driving along the road from Menzies to the Mount Ida Mine one of us (B.J.) noticed small groups of Banded Stilt chicks on the road. From just west of Lake Ballard north for 60 km, groups of 30-40 birds were encountered every kilometre or so, all running south. Motorists using the road scattered the chicks causing some fatalities; however, the chicks could not be headed and they quickly sped around any obstacle. All were juveniles and of similar age, no adults were seen. The vegetation was dry mulga country; no water was seen in the vicinity.

It is obvious that breeding had taken place and the young were undertaking a mass overland migration by walking; perhaps from Lake Barlee to Lake Ballard.

— RAY GARSTONE and BRIAN JEFFERIES, Woodanilling, W.A.

**White-winged Triller on Rottneest Island.** —The White-winged Triller *Lalage sueurii* has been listed as a vagrant on Rottneest Island on the basis of 3 specimens collected by C.P. Congreve in 1903 (Glauert 1929; Storr 1965).

Since then there have been no recorded sightings.

On 13 October 1982 we saw a female White-winged Triller perched in a eucalypt eating a caterpillar. The observation was made below the microwave tower near the camping ground on a sunny morning. In addition to obtaining a good look at the bird, a tape recording was made of its calls. On the basis of this tape Graeme Chapman (CSIRO) verified our identification.

#### REFERENCES

- GLAUERT, L. 1929. Contributions to the fauna of Rottneest Island. No. 1 Introduction and Vertebrates. *J. Proc. R. Soc. West. Aust.* 15:37-46.
- STORR, G.M. 1965. The avifauna of Rottneest Island, Western Australia. III Landbirds. *Emu* 64:172-180.
- D.A. SAUNDERS and C.P. de REBEIRA, Division Wildlife Research, CSIRO, Helena Valley, W.A. 6056.

**Black Butcherbird in Western Australia.** — In October 1982 I observed or heard about twenty Black Butcherbirds (*Cracticus quoyi*) in three well-separated stands of mangroves 40-50 km north of Wyndham and collected three specimens. Previously the westernmost record of this species in northern Australia was at Port Keats, N.T., ca. 160 km eastwards.

I am grateful to Mr. and Mrs. W.H. Butler, whose grant to the Western Australian Museum enabled me to join the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife's survey of the Cambridge Gulf mangroves led by Mr. N.L. McKenzie.

— R.E. JOHNSTONE, W.A. Museum, Perth.

**A Red-necked Phalarope at Pelican Point.** — A Red-necked Phalarope, *Phalaropus lobatus*, was observed by the Environmental Science class from Churchlands College of Advanced Education during a field excursion to the Pelican Point Bird Sanctuary on the Swan River foreshore at Crawley, W.A. (31°59'S, 115°49'E), on the afternoon of April 7th, 1981. As beginning bird watchers, we were very sceptical of our identification from [E. Slater (1970), *A Field Guide to Australian Birds: Non-Passerines*], particularly as this species is so rarely seen in Australia, and so I returned the following afternoon to observe and photograph the bird.

On both occasions the Phalarope was seen swimming alone at the north-eastern end of the swamp within the sanctuary, and was never more than one metre from the shore. It was in constant motion, bobbing and turning as it swam. This is characteristic behaviour for the species [*Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds* (1976), p201]. It was also very tame and I was able to get within 10 metres of it to convince myself of its identity.

This sighting has now been confirmed by Mr Jim Lane of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, who advises that the phalarope is a female and in breeding plumage. This species has recently been recorded at Rottneest Island in winter plumage [Smith and Saunders (1980), *West. Aust. Nat.*, 14: 237-238], but I believe this is a new record for the Swan River and the Pelican Point Bird Sanctuary.

—JANE PRINCE, Science Department, Churchlands College of Advanced Education, Pearson St., Churchlands 6018.